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AUTHOR van Treyen, Gene
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses, from a personal point of view, the process of writing a poem, from inception through revision to the final product. The intention is instructional for any person who wishes to explore the nature of creative, directed expression in language. Because it is a personal account, however, it is idiosyncratic in nature and possibly not teachable in a broader pedagogical sense. It is a kind of workshop, albeit one which is focused on self-criticism and the intuitive personal evolutionary process through which a poem matures. The paper was written as a self-reflective assessment of the author's own approach to writing and done so as a possible model for others interested in writing and how one individual goes about the process. From an instructional viewpoint, such explanations may provide useful tools for writing poetry, particularly in the case of the novice. (Contains 3 samples of writing with revisions noted; the created poem is appended.) (Author/CR)

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The Poem in Process: Writing and Revision and Revision and...

Gene van Troyer

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The Poem in Process: Writing and Revision and Revision and...

Gene van Troyer

Abstract

This paper discusses, from a personal point of view, the process of writing a poem, from inception through revision to the final product. The intention is instructional for anyone who wishes to explore the nature of creative, directed expression in language. Because it is a personal account, however, it is idiosyncratic in nature and possibly not teachable in a broader pedagogical sense. In short, the process is intuitive, and the author makes no apologies for this fact. It was written as a self-reflective assessment of the author's own approach to writing and done so as a possible model for others interested in writing and how one individual goes about the process.

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Key words : Poetry, literature, writing

This article is a kind of workshop, albeit one which is focused on self criticism and the personal evolutionary process through which a poem matures. This is a process which has always intrigued me, particularly with regard to how a poet leaps from one version of a poem to another, at last settling on the (sometimes) final version that sees print. Few poets ever explain the rationale behind abandoning one avenue they have started down in favor of taking another, or at least their explanations seldom see print in any form other than a variorum edition of their work—and how many poets ever become significant enough to rate a variorum edition?

From an instructional viewpoint, I think such explanations could provide useful tools for writing poetry, particularly in the case of the novice. Hence, this article. The poem being looked at is the introductory passage I wrote for a collaborative work I did with Andrew Joron, Robert Frazier and Kathryn Rantala, an interconnected group of poems called a *renga* (Japanese for "linked verse"). Traditional renga are composed of *tanka* (a five-line verse form), but as we felt this form was not suited to the embodiment

of ideas (except through image), the four of us decided to employ a modified sonnet form. Why we decided this, why we wanted to do a poem together, and how we went about it are subjects for another article, so I won't dwell on them here. Suffice to say that the entire sequence of sixteen poems is titled "The Memory in the Earth: a Chain of Poems" (see Appendix), and that I wrote the introductory poem, which, as in any renga, sets the theme and tone of everything that follows. Much of what I say about "Renga Ia" will be in the context of the overall aim of the complete sequence.

Before reading further, take a look at Specimens #1, #2, and #3. The difference between #1 and #2 is dramatically obvious, but between #2 and #3—at least in terms of *content*—the difference is only slight, a matter primarily of a few changed words and the rearrangement of the lines. How did I get from the first to the second? I'm not going to tell you it was through "intuition", though this is the primary source of good poetry (and fiction). In this case it was conscious

Specimen #1

They are so far, those hindustans (...a thunder)
turned in our ribs, like fists, and
thunder like low cries with many heartbeat
shakes our brains. We nail upon

The river, satin unrolled, our skin
unrolled before the wind on masts
of bone, the shell houses of our skulls

Turning, slow, infested with the heat,
to watch the river flowing from our veins.
The tribes have gathered on the banks,
their shaman chant us on in this retreat

To origin: voices rising from the cells,
the psychogenic past, its strata burnt
above these thoughtful waters, fossils
dressed in clay exposed to sunlight.

Specimen #2

The earth has grown aware
and we are thinking for it
reaching after memories
each spindle we thread into shell skin

like fossils frozen
a stricken reaching further
in the psychogenic past,
in atavistic genes alive in DNA, that deepest
of the life's horizons.

We excavate them, frantically.
The bones are stacking up,
growing into skeletons, tree-like
without leaves. Their tribes are gathering,

their shaman chant us on in this retreat
to origin: voices rising from the cells
as strata after strata bares its thoughtful cargo
to the sunlight, reflective as the slow earth
turning in space.

Specimen #3 (Renga Ia): FINAL FORM
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The earth has grown aware, and we
are thinking for it, reaching after memories
like fossils frozen in the psychogenic past.

Or atavistic genes in DNA,
that deepest of the life's horizons.
We excavate them, frantically.

The bones are stacking up, growing
into skeletons, tree-like without leaves in the wind
but whispering anyway: Their tribes are gathering,
their shaman chant us on in this retreat

To origin: voices rising from the cells,
animated earth, as stratum after stratum
bares its thoughtful cargo to the sunlight,
reflective as the slow planet moving in space.

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knowledge of what the first poem of a renga chain is supposed to accomplish that led me to abandon the first version.

The intent of "The Memory in the Earth" was to celebrate, through poetry, natural science as displayed in the writings of Loren Eiseley, who was a first rate anthropologist and poet. In this regard, the river metaphor was clearly out of place; Eiseley was by his own description a "bonehunter". He plunged into the ground, not into water, to find his bones. The opening metaphor, therefore, would be more appropriately established if it were connected to land—to fossil beds—instead of positing a river; the association of "river" with the image of strata at the close of #1 was too tenuous, and awkward as a result. I wanted an image that would set the poem squarely into Eiseley's corner from the first line.

As I looked at that lead metaphor, thought about all that I knew of Eiseley's writings, and regarded those lines in version #1 at the end, "its strata bared above these thoughtful waters", a new opening metaphor suggested itself. Something that occurs throughout Eiseley's writings is his constant reference to fossil remains and artifacts as a kind of "memory". If the earth is graced with memories, then there should be some kind of awareness to go with it. Of course, the metaphor could easily have grown from this into something that said the earth was thinking for itself, but another aspect of Eiseley's thought regarded the human species as an inextricable part of its environment—the self-aware, thinking part.

At this point I recalled something which Jacob Bronowski had written in one of his many essays, something about matter evolving into all of the complex forms of life until it achieved sentience, and the Universe was able to contemplate itself. The new metaphor in Specimen #2 had practically written itself, and most of what followed was suggested by what precedes it and was, in fact, far easier to write—the first version took me a couple of days of concentration to work into shape, but the second, with all its differences, took only a couple of hours. And it communicated what I had wanted to say so much more clearly!

But it wasn't done yet. Note the crossed-out lines in Specimen #2. "Each spade we thrust into that skin," while not a bad line, would have required an additional line to modify it, and this would have violated the arbitrary 14-line limit I and my co-authors had placed on our contributions to the renga. Moreover, I was able to cover for it in the sixth line, "We excavate them," which had a better result. So I settled upon "reaching after memories like fossils." This had the added attraction of saying more in less space,

which the first version had failed to do.

The next line deletion, "a window looking further," did not please me in any case, though since it was originally connected to the first line deletion it had to go, but what really made me uneasy was the fact that *window* and *spade* just did not work as disparate images, even if one takes into account that the hole which is dug by the spade could be considered a metaphorical "window". Once again the sixth line of Specimen #3, the final version, came to my rescue. This line now did the work that previously had required four extra lines.

Finally, the individual word changes and line rearrangements that occurred between Specimens #2 and #3: in all honesty, the reason for reassembling the lines was two-fold —enjambment to break up all the end-stopped lines, and to get everything to fit comfortably into 14 lines. Too many end-stopped lines tend to give a poem an overly dramatic tone which might make it seem melodramatic; enjambment can lighten what would otherwise become a portentous load. A lot of end-stopping gets monotonus for me, and by breaking the lines into cypherings of end-stops and enjambments I made the tone of the poem less weighty. This had the added affect of stratifying the line structure, giving the poem a sonic resemblance to the stratified soil and rock structure of the earth.

The first of the word changes between #2 and #3 is "Frantically": in #2 I have this word set off as a sentence, which is wrong, for the breath-grouping of this line does not call for the full stop of a period either before or after the word; it is merely a subordinate clause requiring the caesura marks of the comma, and this is why it stands corrected in Specimen #3. The next significant word-change comes in the last line, where I have changed "slow earth" to "slow planet." This is, I think, a bias on my part, but I felt that using *earth* in the last line would imply, with its proximity to *stata*, mere soil when what I wanted to convey was the sense of the entire planet.

These word changes ultimately are related to the line changes which have been worked into the poem. If the earth has grown aware and we are thinking for it, then it follows that we must be part of the earth, the animate part. Hence line 12 of #3 also required that I drop "earth" from the last line of the previous version. Other additions and amendations followed naturally, tightening the structure of the poem and widening its range of meaning: "tree-like without leaves in the wind" became modified by "but whispering anyway," which filled a logical gap that had preceded *"Their tribes are gathering,/their shaman chant us on...."*

One might ask, of course, why I didn't just start out with the second version. I agree

that it would make things a lot easier to get it mostly right the first time, but writing doesn't work that way. Usually you wind up with someting quite different from what you started out with. While I had a general idea of what I wanted to write *about*, I had no idea of the words I wanted to use until I started putting them on paper. I realized this very early on and decided to let come whatever came, and to work it into shape afterwards by using first versions as keys to unlock expressions that would, I hope, come much closer to what I wanted to say until I had pinned it down. It meant cutting out a lot of good lines, but it wasn't wasted effort: I can save the lines and possibly use them in another poem (or story). One never knows when a deleted line might spark another poem.

And the final result is always worth it. In this case I successfully introduced every major theme that the following sections of the renga echoed and amplified—and at the same time I made a poem that can stand on its own. If there is anything to learn from the foregoing other than that I'm a poet engaing in a poet's conceit—self-indulgent back-patting—it is this: the process of writing is not static and necessarily involves revision. I hope this account of what appears to be a simple 14-line poem reflects that process.

Appendix

The Memory in the Earth

A chain of poems by:

Gene Van Troyer
Robert Frazier
Andrew Joron
Kathryn Rantala

1a

The earth has grown aware, and we
are thinking for it, reaching after memories
like fossils frozen in the psychogeologic past,

or atavisic genes in DNA,
that deepest of the life's horizons.
We excavate them, frantically,

the bones are stacking up, growing
into skeletons, tree-like without leaves in the wind
but, whispering anyway. Their tribes are gathering,
their shaman chant us on in this retreat

to origin: voices rising from the cells,
animated earth, as stratum after stratum
bares its thoughtful cargo to the sunlight,
reflective as the slow planet moving in space.

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1c

We are inhabited by the logic of the long ago
The light of million year-old scenes
Lingers still within our cells

& lacks all witness: a memory as blind
As the noise of lifeless struggles
Between the Earth & Sun
Resounding immemorial with an eye's dilation

It is a picture made out of flesh
Whose corruption is
The rhythm of a thought

Gravity provides the syntax
For these elemental signs
Whose reading is the appetite of animals
Our cell's devouring of other cells: the earliest society

1b

Your ghosts are here, in alchemy, and they
murmur from all the artifacts you layered
the office of your maverick life with;

the hand ax worn less from its uses than
from the slow turning of your pondering hands,

the museums full of thumb-turned beads
and shattered catlinite pipestems,
warm and pink as the universe beneath all our skins.

the voices even infect the bones we carry,
faring silently along the synapses to our dreams.

The layers of dust sift past themselves
By petrification they replicate, then speak
Dust is the flesh of your unextinguished vision

1d

In elegaic other voice the heart hears rhythm
soft pottery vessels passed ear to era
and not dropped.

Precise and inexact the blood borne globes
make shape of environment
showering starless in the gardens
uninterruptible messages which,

sometimes, we hear.
As we happened to find in stasis,
in Shanidar, in the mountains, how paleoliths

sheltered small earth burials
and inside, the petals of ongoing plants,
as inside our forgetfulness,
both intimacy and stone.

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2a

Hair untidy as a bison's mane,
his face shorn of glasses and smiles
and other human architecture,
the photograph scans like a Max Ernst landscape.

A tightly woven blanket grows over his shoulders,
solidly patterned as acres of nodding sunflowers
meeting the endless corn on the arid loom of Kansas.

The weight of this native history
bends that resilience within him,
that affinity to canyons and wind-eroded scarps.

And visible a fault line, a crack in pottery,
between his life and its use.
The soil has learned mortality.
This theorem infects everything that touches itself.

2b

At night, salamanders
Ghostly as the lambent tongues of sages
Lick soft brows of the new-born hills

Now you've joined them, old anthropophagist
Morning was the flag you raised
Above the vanquished city's fossil bed

Here are more Earth embryos
Used as a shawl to warm stooped shoulders
— & GOD! a western shaman's stale breath
Greedy & all-knowing
Assails wombless Asia at the gill phase

Here too are furry lemurs
Scampering forth after thunder has died
To dine upon the left-overs of a dinosaur repast

2c

Feeling that questions after class were unnatural selection,
he detailed everything in context
and left the room.

Alone again, as for most things,
he thought about preimpact blazes,
(gunshot, meteors, poems, the need to perceive the whole
though terminus be death)

In another part of Pennsylvania a fellow anthropologist
would study the isolate Cinder Woman,
consumed spontaneously by fire, then fame;

the homeless permanency of the plains
regulated his own rate of combustion. He released it
in careful bursts, invisible as sticks,
perceiving in deserts the articulate fires of caves.

2d

A fire burns a torrent in the skull-like caves,
its light like thought roves out across a plain,
a mute terrain of unrecovered memories,
the petrified remains, the bone-filled earth

amid the stars. The hunters digging there—
their brains like pyres! The silent burials come up,
their rituals preserved in stone: our past,
and given voices as those old skeletons

are bonded to our own, bedrock grounding our skin.
Fragments of the dead? God, no! Continuum.
The fire is alone, but the light murmurs:

"Through shattered and receding skulls,
a stranger has crept and made his way."
The fire burns a rage of dreams beneath the stars.

3a

What tuneless evasions the wind
Has learned
— air that turns away from — turns away

Reflective
As the lunar eyes of pools
In a forest of burned-out trees

Spider-threads of forgotten speech
Drift before the Sun
...back into the blue
Ice-epochs, broken roads in seismic echo run

Everything at rest is in motion
Along the axis of time
...countless tiny cords of silver
Binding rain-clouds to the soil

3b

The vaulted fossil,
falcon bones in matrix
cracking as the ground around it moved

We dug at arm's length,
as if to strive were definition.
The earth shell resolutely held

Then plumbed encasement
isolate at last
fell loose into our hands.
A bone studded momentum

Shadowed Windhover in suspense
should sleep, but shuddered,
all muscles against the night rind
As if to come through.

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3c

Drawing circles in the dust, the last Neanderthal
looks on as the paleo-ontologist gazes at the past
in her eyes, his memories of his world shedding
like blue ghosts of smoke from the fire

of life. Her resurrection sleeps in our genes,
like the bones of her ancestors rest in the earth,[3]
deep under sound; and his eyes weigh
the freight of her ontogeny, the ceaseless
cytoplasmic flow from Cambrian headwaters
laking into her, then into us, dressed in the combustion

of our skin and the language of its own
nucleic thought. Past mixing with the present,
something drawing time in a circle, and wearing us
like clothes, changing suits to fit the weather

3d

As empty mechanisms of sand
drift & shift
reforming what sameness into sameness

aged fingers straining also against their own
disguise, backed down
into the logocentric heart of Eden

shed the torch for flint
feel among unnumbered Ice Age stone
shed themselves for Archaeopteryx and Coelacanth
ghost though the animalized Cretaceous waters
coalesce with amino acids

the mesa winds whistle free calibrations
disturbing only that which is never still
...the Earth turns forgetful, inebriate with motion

4a

Ebullience in its first form
The find, felt under skin
as sails lacing through Corinth
before the invention of wind.

What sense knows first the mind fills
It is the sure soul in negligent times
uplifted by fragments in holes.

and no less to signify P.e spare, yellow carpals
in the rotundity of time
Recognition. A sound imagined by two dimensions
encountering one space.

The sound rose to awe
This one sought the distance between points,
still reaches that far.

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4b

The tribes are falling. Bury your dead. The shaman
now paleopsychologist, grins, his advice
just sense of those amenities written in
behind the stars. The others watch the universe,
their thoughts dressed with its candescent finery.

ripples in the abyss of shadows and time
like the wind that shudders out across the desert.
The fire gutters, and they huddle close, clasping hands
like embers as the shadows leap in their circle of light.
Remember. Nothing stays the same. The old man's breath

crawls along their skin like the history of life,
and they feel the engine of the earth turning.
What tribes of unimagined ages yet to come
are gathering in their cells? What ghosts unborn?

4c

The dream animal — thalamic descendent to the joy
of recognition, inhabiting that gravity-cooled Turkana
where the mind embedded itself with secrets
and wore the Milky Way as syntax.

Dreams but a shadow from the questioning fire,
each breath a shimmering pedomorph
each gesture seeking after image
Inside the psychoevolutionary strata, light measures—
dagger of sun across a rock glyph — internalized
this familiarity pulses in no direction, yet all

Images: the sibilance of our plasm,
of the scientist and shaman
alone in the classrooms of thought
when their songs impact into a single flame

4d

Surrounded by leaping shadows of their own making
Four old fires speak & spin
Four angry blossoms planted in deep pits
In the middle of the desert

The shaman says: outside this circle of voracious light
Nothing is — who knows how to answer
Shivering here, before the heat of faceless deities
— for they bring both illumination & its lack

There is another hand within my hand
Another breath inside my breath
Outside the circle — there is a shadow who wears my face

Images of the dead commingle
In these stars: distant mirrors of the Earth
Engthered & nurtured in the molten communities of our
blood